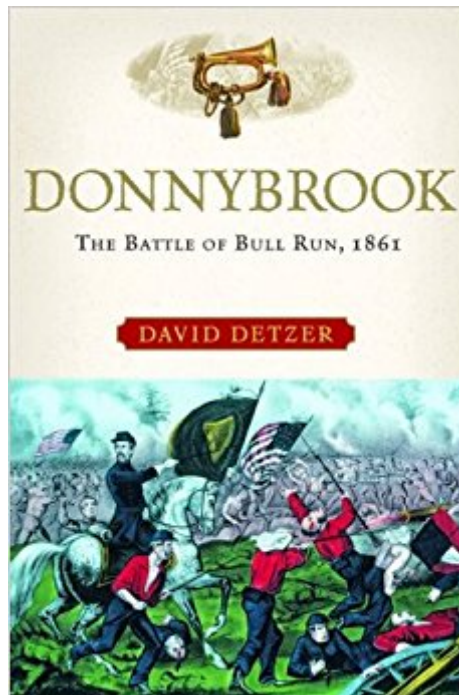


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Donnybrook: The Battle Of Bull Run, 1861



Synopsis

In April 1861, Confederate artillery blasted Fort Sumter into surrender. Within weeks, the Confederacy had established its capital at Richmond. On May 24, Lincoln ordered troops across the Potomac into Virginia, only a few miles from the Confederate military base near the hamlet of Manassas. A great battle was inevitable; whether this would end the war, as many expected, was the only question. On July 21, near a stream called Bull Run, the two forces fought from early morning until after dark in the first great battle of the Civil War. America would never be quite the same. Donnybrook is the first major history of Bull Run to detail the battle from its origins through its aftermath. Using copious and remarkably detailed primary source material-including the recollections of hundreds of average soldiers-David Detzer has created an epic account of a defining moment in American history.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The Civil War's first major battle was not especially bloody or decisive, but this fascinating study makes it an apt microcosm of the conflict. Historian Detzer (*Allegiance: Fort Sumter, Charleston and the Beginning of the Civil War*) provides a lucid narrative of the battle's course, judiciously assesses the causes and authors of the Union defeat, draws vivid thumbnail sketches of participants from generals to privates, and debunks the "stone wall" legend and other enduring myths of the battle. But the book's greatest strength is its account of the social, psychological and organizational aspects of warfare in the Civil War epoch. Fought by hastily mobilized amateurs, the battle highlighted the Herculean difficulties the two sides faced in clothing,

supplying and feeding large armies and trying to turn fractious civilians into competent soldiers. And Bull Run gave volunteers imbued with romantic jingoism their first taste of the horror, chaos and physical agony of combat. Drawing on a mountain of first-hand accounts, Detzer paints a detailed panorama of every aspect of army life, from the mechanics of working a musket, to the grisliness of battlefield medicine, the scrounging for meals and the suffering through long, waterless marches on a sweltering July day. The result is a splendid portrait of the Civil War as the soldiers knew it. B&w photos not seen by PW. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Starred Review This is the fourth account of the First Battle of Bull Run (or Manassas) to appear in the last 15 years, but Detzer's work stands above the crowd because it possesses several superior qualities. Narrative verve is present, but more important is the author's grip on how difficult it was for Civil War generals to control a battle, and how difficult it is for a historian to reassemble the chaos of combat into a coherent chronicle. Returning to these two challenges as he recounts the preliminary maneuvers that precipitated Bull Run, Detzer revises the blame conventionally heaped on the losing Union general, Irvin McDowell. Among other reasons, McDowell's attack plan misfired because of a staff officer's incompetence, despite which he almost gained the victory. This is where the "Stonewall" Jackson legend comes into play. Detzer dismantles the moniker--allegedly uttered by a Confederate general killed in the battle--as both fictitious and out of proportion to the dubious stalwartness of Jackson's regiments, two of which completely cracked. Detzer also vivifies the soldier's experience of fear and physical exhaustion, polishing what is nearly a model of how a Civil War battle history should be written. Gilbert Taylor Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved

In general I like the book. However, there are two factors which tend to grate. One is that the author has some axes to grind as well as people to defend. In the first part of the book Detzer makes a clear effort to exonerate Patterson as culpable for later events. His efforts go so far that he evens magnifies distances to provide excuses for Patterson. The author also seems to have a hard place for Scott and Beauregard. The second factor that is actually more egregious is the author's consistent inability to tell distance or direction. Martinsburg, VA (now WVA) is not 40 miles from Hagerstown, MD, but doubling the distance worked to defend Patterson. Detzer breaks down the actual battle field into four sectors as defined by the Sudley road and the Warrenton tpk. He then goes on to misidentify the compass location of each sector, consistently misnaming the northEAST

sector as the northWest. At the point the battle shifts to the northWest sector, he claims the sector is the northEast sector. Later, he describes McDowell having moved along the road/path, from the turnpike, toward Sudley Ford (i.e. in a generally NW direction) and looking across Bull Run sees troops the author identifies as coming from the depot. Except that Detzer says McDowell looked to the southWest, when the depot, and troop movements would have been from the southEast. Later, after he says that Keyes had moved across Bull Run, that is, to the southern, although also somewhat western side, he describe Keyes moving along the east side of the water. Perhaps he meant moved easterly on the southwestern bank. One final quibble, Detzer says that details about troop movements and actions during many portions of the battle are confused and or missing. Yet, he often describes details like troops coming up a path. What path? Claiming lack of details and then providing details for which there are no supporting maps makes for a frustrating experience. Overall I liked the book. Detzer's background on troop training etc was informative, and imparted just how amateurish were both sides at this point. As others have indicated, the lack of maps is really execrable - the more so in that the author is the one who could have used one.

My review is based on my reading the 3-book set, obviously first to last.DONNYBROOK:

Fortunately I read several reviews here and was alerted to the map issue, so I ordered the paperback. The paperback maps were disappointing in many ways, but not totally worthless. The photos in my paperback were blotchy, to the point I had trouble making out several photos. Mr. Detzer goes through the trouble of developing a quadrant system for localizing the field then proceeds to make a several incorrect references to his own 'coordinate' system. To the author's credit the text is good, once you get a handle on the many units and their whereabouts on the battlefield his description of the battle is exciting. He also provides a lot of background info on soldiering, the political situation, the region, and major characters...along with eyewitness testimony.DISSONANCE: I think I expected too much from this part of the trilogy. According to the author's own analysis the chances of the Confederates actually capturing Washington were remote, I guess the author was trying to sell an exciting bridge between Sumter and Bull Run. Despite that disappointment, Mr. Detzer still built a good bridge.ALLEGIANCE: An eye-opener for me, never having studied the events surrounding Ft. Sumter. Detzer paints a civil picture of those characters at the scene of the crime, the criminals (IMO) being those in Washington who gave the go-ahead to violate the status-quo in Charleston harbor.SERIES COMMENTS: I think Mr. Detzer, possibly in the interest of being thorough, has a tendency to introduce too many minor characters and events. Keeping track of these minor things frequently interrupts flow and sometimes frustrates the reader,

this happens frequently in ALLEGIANCE. Offsetting these is his ability to capture some emotional incidents: The flag ceremonies in Ft. Sumter, Anderson's return to New York and his appearance at the war rally, and the march of the NY militia through New York on their way to Washington...there are many more in the series. I would rather have given the series 3 and 1/2 stars instead of 4, but I couldn't bring myself to give the series only 3 stars. Mr. Detzer took on a big task with the trilogy, ie the first 100 days of the American Civil War, and he did a good job but not great. The series is worthwhile if you're not familiar with this early period, a hard-core 1861 reader may be disappointed.

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